

Fired Kandahar police chief says Canadians let him down

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KANDAHAR, AFGHANISTAN — Stripped of his uniform and placed under investigation after last month's spectacular jailbreak, Kandahar's former police chief lashed out Thursday at what he described as Canada's failure to help capture the hundreds of prisoners who escaped the shattered prison.

Sayed Agha Saqib, dining on a lavish meal of lamb and chicken at his home in Kandahar city last night, asked why Canadian soldiers did not chase the fugitives running away from Sarpoza prison on June 13.

“My police didn't have modern weapons, and they didn't have night-vision goggles,” Mr. Saqib said. “So why did you want us to go into those fields? It was the responsibility of NATO and the ANA [Afghan National Army].”

A Canadian commander has said it was not his troops' responsibility to round up the confused mix of Taliban and criminals who straggled through the fields south of the prison in the hours after the jailbreak. The Canadians gave information about the fugitives' location to Mr. Saqib that night, saying it was a police matter.



Sayed Agha Saqib, former chief of police of Kandahar

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When daylight broke the next morning, Mr. Saqib said, his police searched the area near the prison but found no escapers.

Afghan commandos also landed helicopters near a cluster of villages roughly 15 kilometres south of Sarpoza later in the day and conducted a sweep. But only three of 400 Taliban suspects have been recaptured, two weeks after the jailbreak.

More broadly, Mr. Saqib described the prison break as a military failure in the districts around Kandahar city. The raiding party of insurgents, which he estimated at 100 to 200 fighters, should never have been allowed to reach the city limits, he said.

“Who came to release the prisoners?” he asked. “It was the Taliban. What is NATO doing here in Afghanistan? They are fighting the Taliban. So why didn't NATO and the ANA keep the Taliban away from the city?”

Looking tired and wearing a few days grey stubble, the former career officer said he's finished with police work. Mr. Saqib said his government has “victimized” him and left him hunting for a job, unlike his predecessor, who was shuffled off to a less-prominent posting last year. His best option might be opening a private business in his home city of Jalalabad, he said.

He also remains under investigation for his role in the jailbreak, along with two other senior security officials in Kandahar who were fired last week. A fourth official, prison warden Colonel Abdul Qadir, has been arrested.

Mr. Saqib said the warden has strong links with tribal and political figures, and will likely escape prosecution.

“He will use his connections and get free,” he said.

The former police chief blames Col. Qadir for slowing his response to the jailbreak. The first explosion was so loud that Mr. Saqib initially thought it was a bombing in the centre of the city, and he climbed to the roof of police headquarters to see whether any fires were burning nearby. He saw nothing but started getting reports from his outposts of a blast on the western edge of the city, near the jail.

He immediately phoned Col. Qadir to ask about the situation, he said, but the warden told him he'd checked with the prison guards and everything was fine. Insurgents had attacked a fuel tanker on the highway near the jail, the warden told the police chief, but the prison was not damaged.

“This was all part of a premeditated plan,” the former chief says, hinting darkly at others officials' deals with the insurgents while denying any complicity himself.

He paused to wash his hands after the evening meal, and talked about how such disasters might be avoided in future. The Afghan police need training, equipment and mentoring of the kind received by the national army, he said.

He recommended rotating police units from dangerous areas to safer districts in the same way that Afghan army soldiers are moved around the country, and paying a premium for serving in combat zones.

The foreign troops must also stop relying on local militias for security, he added. Irregular forces and untrained local police are often tolerated as a stop-gap measure in places where the uniformed police aren't strong enough to maintain security by themselves, but Mr. Saqib said they undermine the police organization.

“If the police have family in the village and the Taliban come from the same village, what can the police do? They know where you live.”

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